

# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

## Commission on Youth

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### **MCDONNELL BUDGET INVESTS IN VIRGINIA'S YOUTH AND FAMILIES** *Virginia Commission on Youth work reflected in House Bill 30, as introduced*

**RICHMOND** – The Virginia Commission on Youth, a bipartisan legislative commission of the Virginia General Assembly, commends Governor Bob McDonnell for elements of his introduced 2015-2016 Budget (House Bill 30) which emphasizes a strong commitment to Virginia's youth and families. The Virginia Commission on Youth is a bipartisan, standing legislative commission of the General Assembly comprised of 12 members (six Delegates, three Senators, and three citizens) that, by mandate, provides a legislative forum in which complex issues may be explored and resolved. In addition, the Commission monitors the development of laws and policies in federal, state, and local governments which impact youth and their families and contribute to the General Assembly's ability to make sound policy decisions based on well-studied and reasoned recommendations.

Various budget initiatives complement the work of the Commission on Youth in the areas of child welfare, juvenile justice, K-12 Education, early childhood development, and child and adolescent mental health. The Commission on Youth has worked closely with the McDonnell administration in conducting legislative studies, identifying best practices, engaging stakeholders and providing evidenced based practices where the greatest returns will be found on these investments. Speaking about the Governor's proposals, Delegate Christopher K. Peace, Chairman of the Commission on Youth, stated, "House Bill 30 supports the future of our great Commonwealth by investing in programs and services for Virginia's children and families. Many of these proposals will provide extraordinary returns by ensuring our children have access to high quality education from early ages, safe and loving families, and that those who are our most vulnerable citizens are protected. Investments like these will help our youth and families succeed and contribute productively to our communities." He added, "I am very proud of our Commission and its staff for leading the way on many of these initiatives."

#### *Child Welfare*

The Governor's Budget includes \$27.7 million in new funding for four initiatives targeted at improving foster care adoption. Governor McDonnell's Virginia Adopts: Campaign for 1,000 has successfully met and exceeded its goal of finding safe and permanent connections for children in foster care with adoptive families. Not only does this program safely reduce the number of children in foster care but by doing so it provides a child with an opportunity to grow in a loving and nurturing environment. Delegate Christopher K. Peace, Chairman of the Commission on Youth, serves on the Governor's Regional Advisory Committee for Adoption.

The introduced budget also dedicates \$16.2 million to cover biennial cost of providing foster care and adoption payments including a 3% increase in foster care payment rates. Funding to expand foster care and adoption subsidies to age 21 would start in fiscal year 2016. This initiative will help protect older youth in Virginia's foster care system and ensure that they have access to services and supports so that they can be successful. Youth who stay in care until 21 are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to end up homeless or become involved in the criminal justice system.

### *Juvenile Justice*

The introduced budget includes \$3,253,150 over the biennium to support mental health and substance abuse evaluation and treatment services for juveniles under state probation and parole and to require the Department of Juvenile Justice develop a plan to ensure continuation of mental health and substance abuse treatment services, including the option of contracting with local providers. This was a recommendation from the Commission on Youth's study – Assessment of Mental Health Needs of Juvenile Offenders.

Because of the number of juveniles with mental health disorders entering the juvenile justice system, it would be extremely valuable to have mental health and substance abuse screenings, assessments, and evaluations for those juveniles under state probation and parole. In FY 2012, over 60% of males and 80% of females committed the Department of Juvenile Justice had significant symptoms of a mental health disorder. In addition, 63% of males and 58% of females had a history of psychotropic medication use. Assessing juveniles earlier in the process would enable judges to move forward with dispositional and other decisions, equipped with more information and a more complete understanding of what might be the appropriate action to take for the juvenile.

### *K-12 Education*

House Bill 30 increases support for instructional spending in public education. The Budget includes \$105 million to incentivize performance with \$21 million for enrollment growth, \$63 million for incentive funding, and \$21 million for research and initiatives to support the goals of the "Top Jobs" Act. The incentive funding is targeted for graduating additional Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics–Healthcare (STEM-H) students needed to keep Virginia's economy competitive and attracting students of all socio-economic levels to higher education. These proposals correspond with the recommendations adopted from the Commission's study – Comparison of Academic Achievement in Virginia with Leading Industrialized Countries. The study findings highlight the importance of identifying and retaining highly effective teachers, closing the achievement gap, and the increasing importance of STEM-H.

### *Early Childhood Development*

In the first five years of life, a child undergoes the most dramatic brain growth and development over the course of his lifetime. The Governor's Budget provides \$7.4 million over the biennium to continue the state's support of pre-kindergarten programs and an additional \$2.0 million to implement kindergarten readiness assessment programs. Programs and support services need to be in place to ensure that children are healthy and well prepared when they begin kindergarten. The Virginia Commission on Youth understands the importance of early childhood development and supports the efforts of the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation to provide quality early childhood education programs that promote school readiness.

### *Virginia's Public Guardian and Conservator Program*

The Budget also includes \$125,500 from the general fund to expand services through the Virginia Public Guardian and Conservator Program to individuals with mental illness and/or intellectual disability who are 18 years of age and older. Virginia's Pubic Guardian and Conservator Program enables incapacitated persons to meet essential requirements for physical and emotional health and management of financial resources and enables them to remain in their homes and communities. The Commission on Youth recommended inclusion of increased funding in the 2014-2016 Biennial Budget to support the Virginia Public Guardian and Conservator Program. This funding responds to the documented need for guardians of last resort.

### *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*

The proposed budget expands mental health outpatient services – \$3.5 million in fiscal year 2015 and \$4.0 million in fiscal year 2016 for mental health services for older teens and young adults transitioning from school, college, or early in their adulthood. This funding will serve older youth and young adults when most serious mental illnesses first make their onset and engagement in treatment is imperative. This item was recommended by the Governor's Task Force on School and Campus Safety. The Commission on Youth serves on the Task Force.

Additional information about the Commission on Youth and the Commission's initiatives can be obtained on the Commission's website at <http://vcoy.virginia.gov>.